

Democrats' pretend fight on voting rights comes to its predictable end

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The year-long charade in which the Democratic Party and the Biden administration pretended to be waging a titanic struggle against Republican attacks on voting rights came to a predictable and ignominious end on Wednesday night.

A motion to bring voting rights legislation to the floor of the Senate was defeated on a party-line vote, with 50 Democrats supporting it and 50 Republicans against. Under Senate rules, 60 votes were required to begin the debate. A subsequent motion, to suspend the rule requiring a 60-vote threshold (the filibuster rule), was defeated 52-48, with two Democrats, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia, siding with the Republicans.

The so-called debate over the procedural motions featured endless posturing by Democratic senators claiming to defend the right of minority voters to go to the polls. Republicans responded with a shameless defense of the autonomy of the states against a “federal takeover” of the elections, a rehash of the “states’ rights” slogan employed by the defenders of segregation in the 1950s and 1960s.

The result had been known in advance, as Manchin and Sinema had made repeated statements of opposition to any change in the filibuster rule, while claiming to support the voting rights bill. The bill had been significantly amended by the Senate leadership to win Manchin’s support, but he still rejected the procedure required to pass it over unanimous Republican opposition.

The outcome was hardly a surprise to the Democratic leadership and the White House. Both Democratic senators had given a public pledge, in late January 2021, to oppose any weakening of the filibuster. It was on the basis of their assurances that Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell dropped his procedural

delaying tactics and allowed the Democrats to organize the Senate as the new majority party, based on the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Kamala Harris.

Nothing has changed since then—meaning there never was any possibility of the Senate enacting any version of the voting rights legislation. But month after month, as Republican-controlled legislatures in Georgia, Texas, Florida and other states enacted laws to restrict absentee voting, limit polling stations and drop boxes, and impose tighter voter ID requirements, Schumer, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and occasionally even Biden himself would issue public statements declaring their undying commitment to passage of a new federal law to overturn the state actions.

In July, Biden made a major speech on the topic, in which he pointed out the connection between the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, carried out by Trump supporters seeking to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, and the wave of new restrictive laws. At that point, 17 Republican-controlled states had enacted 28 laws restricting ballot access for working class, poor and minority voters, and a total of 400 such laws had been introduced across the country.

“Hear me clearly,” he said. “There’s an unfolding assault taking place in America today, an attempt to suppress and subvert the right to vote in fair and free elections, an assault on democracy, an assault on liberty, an assault on who we are as Americans.” The US, he continued, would face “a new wave of unprecedented voter suppression and raw and sustained election subversion” in the 2022 midterm elections.

“We are facing the most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War,” he declared. “That’s not hyperbole. ... The Confederates back then never breached the Capitol as insurrectionists did on January 6. I’m not saying this to alarm you. I’m saying this

because you should be alarmed.”

But the only concrete action he took was to authorize the Democratic National Committee to spend \$25 million on a voter registration and education drive in the states affected by the new laws. This was a tacit acknowledgement that the new laws were there to stay, and there was no possibility of overturning them through federal action.

Biden then dropped the subject for six months, while he focused on seeking bipartisan agreement with the Republican Party on an infrastructure bill—a gigantic boondoggle for construction companies and financiers—and sought, unsuccessfully, to convince his own party to pass the Build Back Better legislation to provide increased funding for environmental and social programs.

Only after the December collapse of Build Back Better did he return to the voting rights question, traveling to Georgia to give a demagogic speech presenting the Democrats as the party of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. This was a travesty of history on both counts, since the Democratic Party was actually the party of the Confederate slaveholders and the defenders of Jim Crow.

This set the stage for Wednesday’s futile vote, timed for the week of Martin Luther King’s birthday.

Presenting the Republican assault on voting rights as a purely racial question is a distortion typical of the identity politics practiced by the Democratic Party. The Republicans are seeking to make it more difficult for the more impoverished sections of the working class to vote, because they tend to favor the Democratic Party. This social layer is disproportionately drawn from among racial minorities, but it is defined by class and income, not race.

For example, the Florida law depriving released felons of the franchise, by requiring them to pay onerous fines and fees, disenfranchises hundreds of thousands of whites, as well as black and Hispanic ex-prisoners.

For the Democratic Party, however, the sole utility of the voting rights question is to mobilize black and other minority voters to go to the polls in 2022. This is under conditions where the Biden administration has provided no other reason for workers to vote Democratic, since its policies have neither suppressed the pandemic nor raised working class living standards.



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